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82-year-old retired warden returns to earn degree

At the age of 82 -- 36 years after he postponed completion of his Dominican education to pursue a job -- Bill Merkle finally received his diploma on May 16.

Bill, a retired warden at High Desert State Prison, completed his final six units this semester and walked with cap and gown at [Commencement ceremonies](#) on the Forest Meadows lawn. It is the end of an academic journey that started in 1975 when Bill first enrolled in Dominican's criminal justice program after he was hired as a captain at San Quentin State Prison in 1972.

Yet, in 1979, Bill's quest was interrupted when he accepted the associate warden position in Susanville. With a family that includes three children, eight grandchildren and four great grandchildren and family friends close to him, Bill was motivated to finish his schooling and earn his college degree.

"I've asked myself 'Why am I doing this?' several times. I'm not going back to work. There are not going to be any further promotions," says Bill, who still lives in Susanville with his wife, Lois, whom he married in 1973. "The crux of it was college was something I jumped into. I started something, and I wanted to finish it. And I committed to it."

That commitment began in 1954 after Bill served in the U.S. Army. He realized he needed a college degree, but also knew he needed to work to put himself through college. Bill was hired at Soledad State Prison in Salinas Valley, later renamed the California Correctional Training Center, and during his off hours earned his AA degree at Hartnell College.

However, when a captain's position opened in San Quentin, Bill yearned to earn a Bachelors degree. He was inspired to take criminal justice classes at Dominican in the evening and even arranged for his psychology professor and classmates to meet inmates inside San Quentin for a panel discussion in a "Physical Appearance" course.

Bill was registered for his final six units at Dominican in 1979 when his boss called one day and ordered him within 48 hours to go to the California Corrections Center (CCC) where Bill's friend was the warden. After being promoted from associate warden to deputy warden, Bill met with Dan McCarthy, a respected California State Department of Corrections Director, to interview for the warden's position at CCC in 1987. He asked Bill why he hadn't finished his schooling at Dominican.

"I am going to get that degree. I don't know when but I'm going to get it," Bill told McCarthy. "I made a commitment."

Months later, then Governor George Deukmejian appointed Bill as warden in Susanville where he settled and raised his family. It was his family -- especially his grandchildren -- and McCarthy's death two years ago that motivated him to keep his word.

"Commitments are important to me. Loyalty is important to me," says Bill, who retired from High Desert State Prison in 1996. "I felt I made that commitment. That's always been a part of it."

Bill reached out to Dominican and discovered that "everybody was super cooperative." Dominican no longer has a criminal justice program, but Marianne Stickel, Assistant Vice President for [Academic Services and Registrar](#), and Dr. Chase Clow, chair of the Humanities Division in the [School of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences](#), worked together to combine Bill's former major with Dominican's current [Humanities and Cultural Studies](#) major. They were able to apply many of the liberal arts courses he took previously to the current major to earn an Interdisciplinary BA.

"Clearly, at this stage in his life, long after retirement and with a very successful 40 year or so career behind him, this is not about getting a job. It is about education for education's sake, which is always a dream for those of us in the Humanities," Dr. Clow says.

“It's been such a pleasure to work with him these past two semesters. Bill is amazing -- full of dedication, persistence, and a positive attitude. He has worked so hard. He had to produce senior level academic writing with proper citations after more than 35 years of being out of school. On top of that, he had to learn new software and online platforms, including how to navigate our library's extensive digital collection. I am so proud of him and so honored to have had a share in his educational journey.”

Bill shared that experience on May 16 with his wife and family members, including some of his 12 grandchildren. They attended the Commencement ceremony at Dominican.

“I always pushed education with the grand kids. Maybe this will make my point with them that college is important,” Bill says. “I went through a 40-year career in corrections, and the people that had the college educations they were the ones that were promoted.”

Bill, however, is retired and having a BA will not likely help him earn a promotion at his age. It will though give him peace of mind of a job well done.

“I've never wavered. I've never said 'Why am I doing this? I'm going to bail out.' ” Bill says. “I'm going to feel a sense of pride that I stuck it out. It's a sense of pride and a sense of commitment.”

[CLICK HERE](#) to read more about Bill Merkle's inspiring story in the Marin Independent Journal